

# Chicago Tribune

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The home team hit one out of the park Monday evening.

Granted, the park was fairly soggy and, therefore, sparsely populated.

But on purely artistic terms, the opening night of Chicago Jazz Festival week provided a significant win for the Chicago Jazz Orchestra, which played a battle of the bands opposite the Count Basie Orchestra in Millennium Park.

In music, of course, winners and losers are purely subjective terms and, perhaps, Basie-band devotees heard victory in the ensemble's indisputably propulsive finale numbers. Yet to this listener's ears, Jeff Lindberg's Chicago Jazz Orchestra consistently played harder, tougher and hotter than their colleagues.

Lest anyone think that's Chicago chauvinism speaking, it's worth noting that when the Chicago Jazz Ensemble and the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra played in close succession in January in Symphony Center, there was no doubt that the New York band bested its Chicago counterpart.

This time, the tables were turned.

You could hear it from the outset: The snarling trumpets and hard-charging reeds of the CJO dispatched virtually every piece as if their lives depended on it.

Although the evening ostensibly was modeled on the classic recording "First Time: The Count Meets the Duke" (a faceoff between the Basie and Ellington bands), the CJO actually played little of Ellington's repertoire.

But when Lindberg and his CJO took on an Ellington landmark—the two-part suite "Diminuendo in Blue" and "Crescendo in Blue"—the band soared. Tenor saxophonist Eric Schneider ignited the solo that links the two works.

Musical matters became still more complex in Charlie Parker's "Red Cross," in a labyrinthine orchestration by CJO Associate Artistic Director Charley Harrison. To hear brass, reed and rhythm sections trading rapid-fire phrases was to behold a first-rate big band testing itself—and coming through the ordeal intact.

When the CJO brought out its secret weapon, vocalist Everett Greene, even Basie devotees must have basked in the luxuriance of Greene's crushed-velvet bass-baritone.

Not that the Basie Orchestra, under the direction of Bill Hughes, didn't put up a heroic fight. The ensemble exquisitely captured the saucy insouciance of Neal Hefti's "Fantail" and other Basie-book fare.

Tenor saxophonist Doug Lawrence proved invincible, his technique so fluid and his sound so huge as to dwarf everyone playing near him. Singer Melba Joyce could do no wrong, the voluptuousness of her tone and the blues sensibility of her phrases refreshing even age-old repertoire such as "All of Me." Yet, ultimately, too many of the Basie-band numbers sounded pallid in ensemble passages, dull in rhythmic attack.

Even so, it was a battle well waged.

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